

Fort Caswell Yacht Basin Resort Photograph Collection, 1926-1941, PhC.187

**State Archives of North Carolina, Office of Archives and History
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Date Completed

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Descriptive Summary

Title

Fort Caswell Yacht Basin Resort Photograph Collection, PhC.187

Creator

C. S. Chase

Abstract:

Photographs and miscellaneous papers documenting the development of the Fort Caswell campus in Brunswick County, NC, into a vacation resort in the 1930's.

Extent

~160 black and white photographic prints varying in size from 8"x10" to 2" x2 ½"; 1 brochure, 5 postcards; 3 copies of a c.1940 typed report with maps and 18 photographs; 1 oversized 1930 map of Fort Caswell; several loose accounting documents

Repository

Information for Users

Access Restrictions

Open for research.

Usage Restrictions

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Preferred Citation

[PhC.187] Fort Caswell Yacht Basin Resort Photograph Collection, State Archives of North Carolina, Office of Archives and History

Acquisition Information

Donated by Carl Van Ness, Head of Archives and Manuscripts in the Smathers Libraries, University of Florida. These materials were with the Chase Collection <http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/pkyonge/Chase.htm>, Special Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, because the Chase family owned and operated a large investment and holding company out of Florida, and some of their dealings including real estate investments, and one such venture was the Fort Caswell property depicted in these photos, which was owned by a Chase subsidiary called the Caswell-Carolina Corporation.

Processing Information

Finding aid completed by Kim Andersen

Completed 13 November 2014

Collection Overview

Photographs and a few papers documenting the attempted development of the Fort Caswell campus in Brunswick County, NC, into a vacation resort in the 1930's by the Sanford, FL, Caswell-Carolina Corporation, S. O. Chase, President-Owner. Most of the Photographs depict exteriors of the buildings, structure, and landscape of the Fort Caswell campus as well as ships seen on the water from Fort Caswell, people fishing and boating at Fort Caswell, and some few interiors of various buildings including details of the workings of the on-site power plant. People shown are unidentified at this time.

Biographical Note

Sydney Octavius Chase (1860-1941), having read about orange groves in Scribner's Magazine, came to Florida from Philadelphia. His brother, Joshua Coffin Chase (1858-1948), joined him in 1884 and together they formed Chase and Company that year. The Chase brothers came to Florida at the right time for Florida citrus and at the right time for them as investment entrepreneurs. Strong family ties in the North provided them with financial backing for their ventures. Joshua left Florida in 1895 to work in the California citrus industry. He returned to Florida in 1904 and rejoined his brother. Another brother, Randall, remained in Philadelphia and augmented his brothers' finances when convenient. Sydney and Joshua were also important civic leaders who took part in community development, most notably in the City of Sanford. Both were elected to the Sanford city commission. They also supported the development of Rollins College, worked with the Florida Historical Society, and were the benefactors of numerous charities.

Chase and Company began as an insurance company and branched out to storage facilities and fertilizer sales. The latter was the beginning of the company's lucrative agricultural supply division which remained in operation throughout the existence of the company. Although citrus was the primary interest, the company also invested in other agricultural pursuits including celery in central Florida, tung oil production in Jefferson County, and winter vegetables and sugar cane in the Lake Okeechobee muck lands. The company was also involved in the peach business in Georgia and North Carolina. The company was incorporated in 1914, with the Chase brothers owning 75 percent of the stock, and reincorporated in 1948. A second generation of Chases began its involvement in the family operations when Sydney O. Chase, Jr. (b. 1890) became a citrus buyer in 1922. He was later joined by his brother Randall who served as president of Chase and Company from 1948-1965. Outside the Chase Family, Alfred Foster, W. R. Harney, and William "Billy" Leffler figured prominently as company executives and investors. The company dissolved in 1979 when its principal assets were sold to Sunniland for \$5.5 million.

The Chases' interest in citrus began when Sydney came to Florida and became associated with General Henry S. Sanford. The Chases would eventually own General Sanford's experimental farm, Belair, and the Chase family home in Sanford was located there. Over the years, the Chases invested in a number of citrus groves and owned others outright. In 1912, they organized the Chase Investment Company as a holding company for their farms. Initially, the company operated the Isleworth, Nocatee, Belair, and Kelly citrus groves as well as celery farms in Sanford. The company was renamed Chase Groves, Inc. in 1951. From time to time, Chase Investment was involved in real estate in Florida and North Carolina. The latter included Fort Caswell, a former military property that was held for a time and then sold. Unquestionably, the jewel in the Chase crown was the Isleworth grove at Windermere. Isleworth's four hundred lake-tempered acres carried the Chases through many difficult times. It proved to be the principal asset at the company's demise when it was sold to golf legend Arnold Palmer in 1984. Chase Groves dissolved that same year, 100 years after the founding of Chase and Company. (From "A Guide to the Chase Collection" by Carl Van Ness)

Historical Note

Overview

Fort Caswell, originally built as a masonry Third System Fort and named in 1833 for the first Governor of North Carolina Richard Caswell, is located in Brunswick County on the eastern tip of Oak Island across from Southport. Congress authorized construction of the fort in 1825 because the area was vulnerable due to its lack of defenses. Oak Island, nearby Smith Island (now known as Bald Head Island) and Smithville (now known as Southport) were popular pirate refuges. Construction on the main fort, located near the end of the island, lasted from 1826 to 1836. The construction of the fort, built of stone and earthworks, was considered one of the strongest in the world. Most of the construction of the main fort still stands today. The rest of the fort, including seven long cement batteries, barracks, officer's quarters, a bakery, horse barn, prison, firehouse, hospital and morgue were built around the turn of the century. One of only three masonry forts in the state of North Carolina, Fort Caswell was used in the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I and World War II, as well as the Persian Gulf War and the Haitian War. Fort Caswell served as a training camp for World War I. After World War I, thinking that the world was at peace, Fort Caswell was abandoned and then sold to a private concern – S. C. Chase, who tried unsuccessfully to turn it into a resort. The federal government re-acquired it, and during World War II the fort was used as an army base and submarine lookout post. After WWII Fort Caswell again went into private hands but housed military personnel who worked nearby during the Persian Gulf and Haitian Wars. Fort Caswell is today owned by the Trustees of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

U.S. Civil War and post-Civil War, 1861-1890s

Fort Caswell was captured by Confederate forces 8 January 1861 just before the start of the U.S. Civil War. The fort was heavily fortified and remained in Confederate hands until abandoned and blown up by its own garrison on 17 January 1865 as Admiral David D. Porter's North Atlantic Squadron lay off the island. The citadel and the barracks structures were burned out and heavy damage was done to the north and west walls by the magazine explosion set by the retreating Confederates. Union forces occupied the fort until sometime after the U.S. Civil War and in 1866 still had a garrison of 205 men at the post. By 1872 it had only a caretaker presence. After the Civil War, the fort remained in ruin until money was appropriated for its reconstruction in 1896 and it was selected for reactivation as a part of the Endicott Board's recommendations for rebuilding coastal defenses.

1890s-1910s

The Endicott Board recommended that Fort Caswell be armed with seven modern reinforced concrete coastal batteries. These batteries were built between 1895 and 1907. Battery Caswell was built into the structure of Old Fort Caswell and, as a result, much of what remained of the old fort was destroyed including the outer perimeter, the citadel shell, the moat and the river facing walls and casemates.

The Endicott Period saw a somewhat orderly development of the post infrastructure that included permanent barracks for three companies, a substantial set of officer's quarters,

senior NCO quarters, a hospital and many support structures. Many of these structures can be seen today, refurbished by the present owner and in use for their various activities. Like Fort Canby and Fort Worden, Fort Caswell is a great look at an Endicott Period Coastal Fort with well cared for, repurposed period structures.

World War I and post-WWI, 1917-1926

With the declaration of war in 1917, all six North Carolina National Guard companies that had trained at Fort Caswell were federalized and ordered to Fort Caswell. The activated troops were retrained at Fort Caswell and sent to the European front. Temporary barracks and tent complexes sprung up to house the federalized troops and the many new enlistees at Fort Caswell. Few of these temporary structures remain today. Three of the seven active coastal gun batteries had their weapons dismounted for the war effort and shipped off to be modified for ground combat. None of the disarmed batteries was rearmed after the war even though all of the guns shipped to France were returned to the U.S. in 1919. In 1924 Fort Caswell was placed in caretaker status and the final disarmament of the gun batteries began. By 1926 the remaining three batteries (Battery McDonough (2), Battery Caswell and Battery Bagley) were disarmed and the Fort was sold to private interests.

Development as a resort, 1926-1940

S. C. Chase of Sanford, FL, bought Fort Caswell in 1926 from the federal government for 201,500.00. As President-owner of the Caswell-Carolina Corporation, his intent was to develop the property as a resort and vacation destination. Under Chase's ownership, many improvements were made to the property and buildings including electrification and telephone service through connectivity with the City of Southport; a water and sewer system; and a steel pier and wharf fronting on the channel of the Cape Fear River; refurbished dwellings, stables, lodges, gymnasium/theater, bakery, and dining facilities among other structures; and two mineral water pools built inside the former gun emplacements of the battery. Chase at various times referred to his enterprise as the Fort Caswell Reservation, the Fort Caswell Yacht Basin and Deepwater Dock, and Fort Caswell Harbor, and Fort Caswell Resort. In September of 1930 Chase had a promotional map printed of the site and all its features. This was part of the promotional materials he was using to try to attract investors for the further development of the resort. Through the mid 1930's Chase sought investors and documents and photos refer to visitors being present at the resort and using its facilities including the harbor, fishing amenities, and lodgings. At some point it also appears that Chase offered the site as a campus for a proposed North Carolina Naval Academy. The resort never really thrived due to the Great Depression and the resulting lack of funds in the hands of potential investors as well as would-be vacationers.

World War II and post-war, 1941-1948

Fort Caswell was reacquired by the U.S. Government in 1941 at the beginning of World War II and became a U.S. Navy depot. At the end of the war, the Fort was declared surplus and sold to the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina in 1949.

Today the site is listed on the National register of Historic Places and is a private retreat facility owned and operated by the Baptist State Convention.

(Sources include <http://www.southporttimes.com/featured/200404.html>, <http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/nr/BW0230.pdf>, and http://www.fortwiki.com/Fort_Caswell)

Collection Arrangement

Collection is arranged in five series:

Promotional documents and investor materials (includes photographs, postcards, brochures, typed manuscripts, accounting documents, and miscellaneous papers), Folder 1

Photographs, c.1935, by unknown photographer(s), Folder 2

Photographs, c.1935-1939, by unknown photographer(s), Folder 3

Photographs, c.1941 and undated, by unknown photographer(s), Folder 4

Photographs by Earl Brown, 30 October 1938, Folder 5

Related Material

Chase Collection, University of Florida Smathers Libraries - Special and Area Studies Collections

<http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/pkyonge/Chase.htm>

North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (part of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Office of Archives and History, Division of Historical Resources) – National Register Nominations

<http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/nr/BW0230.pdf>